

July 1, 2006, Bozeman Chronicle

## **Medicaid shift boosts care for kids**

By DAVE RICHARDSON, Chronicle Staff Writer

Thousands of low-income Montana children will be able to get the medical care they need, thanks to a state law that takes effect Saturday.

The law, passed last year, makes it easier for low-income families with children to qualify for Medicaid, and will allow thousands more children to sign up for medical coverage provided by the state's Child Health Insurance Program.

Local health care providers hailed the move as a much-needed boon to low-income families in Gallatin County.

"We see kids enrolled in both Medicaid and CHIP, and since Montana is a fairly poor state, anything we can do to get more kids adequate health care is very important," Buck Taylor, director of the Gallatin Community Clinic in Bozeman said Friday.

Previously, low-income families with \$3,000 or more in assets -- cars, savings accounts and other property -- were disqualified from getting Medicaid coverage for their children. The new law raises that limit to \$15,000.

The shift is expected to add about 3,800 children to state Medicaid rolls. Of those, 800 would be new enrollees who were previously disqualified by the asset test.

About 3,000 would shift to Medicaid from CHIP. And since the number of CHIP enrollees is capped by law, switching 3,000 children to Medicaid will open the same number of desperately needed slots for new CHIP enrollees, officials said.

"No child in Montana should have to go without health insurance," Gov. Brian Schweitzer said in a press release. "We owe our kids a healthy start in life so they can grow into healthy, productive members of our communities. That's something we can all benefit from."

The change only applies to families enrolling children in Medicaid. Adult Medicaid seekers will still face the \$3,000 asset limit.

According to state Department of Public Health and Human Services reports, Montana spent more than \$674 million on Medicaid last year.

Federal reimbursement covered almost 80 percent of the cost. The remaining \$148 million came out of the wallets of Montana taxpayers.

State DPHHS officials were unavailable for comment Friday on the potential budget and tax implications of the shift.